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ABSTRACT

Breaking down gender barriers in composition and literature classrooms suggests that teachers rethink the forms of writing they demand of their students (e.g., argumentation and exposition) and that they encourage a wide range of approaches which account for gender-specific modes of writing and interpreting texts. Various writing assignments such as autobiography or business narratives can help students understand "ways of knowing" outside the often patriarchal hierarchy of corporations. Women's ways of knowing have not only helped expand the canon, they have helped to expand thinking about pedagogy, writing assignments, and about the roles of students and instructors themselves inside and outside the writing classroom. (A 35-item select bibliography is attached.) (SAM)

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Breaking Down Gender Barriers: Theories into Practice

What are gender barriers and what are we doing about them in writing classrooms? Some writing instructors now routinely teach students to modify language, often by replacing he with the bi-gendered she or he. But more needs to be done in creating assignments, selecting text books, and managing the writing classroom. As Janice M. Wolff has concluded, the writing instructor must reexamine the theory behind the practice, including the ethical and affective implications of teaching writing.

The ultimate critic of these social constructionist approaches in teaching, is, not surprisingly, Camille Paglia, who argues that since "sexual differences...are based in biology[,] [a]cademic feminism is lost in a fog of social constructionism. It believes that we are totally the product of our environment" (63). If we are as biologically determined as Paglia believes, then there's not much we can do about socially constructing the writing classroom. We can only educate students to interpret aggression as an essentially testosterone-driven, male experience, as opposed to the feminine experience, which Paglia argues is biologically nurturing and enlivening. It's all a matter of biology.

But for some time, through classroom experience, and not through the theoretical claims of Paglia and others, writing instructors have found that social as well as biological barriers exist and that they can be successfully confronted and

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changed, and, in fact, ought to be changed, for as Paulo Freire asserts, "...[E]ducation is never a neutral process, but either facilitates 'the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system,' thereby encouraging them to internalize its values, or becomes a 'practice of freedom' and a means of enabling students to participate in the transformation of that system" (qtd. in Finke 7). As Laurie Finke further explains in a recent article in College English, for several decades feminist teachers have "...attempted to promote more egalitarian classrooms responsive to differences not only of gender, but also of class, race, sexual preference, ethnicity, and age" (7). In developing these strategies, instructors have created "liberatory, oppositional or even radical pedagogies" (Finke 7).

One change in approaches has been the rediscovery of voice in the writing classroom, and especially the distinctiveness of women's voices. This distinctiveness has emerged not as an inferior or "flawed" voice, but as an important voice in need of greater recognition through texts and writing assignments in the classroom. For some time, linguists have noted that women's language, and by extension, their ways of thinking, have been understood, even unconsciously, as inferior to men's language in many cultures. According to Denis Baron and others, "Grammar and usage books [have, at times]...singled out women's language as flawed" (71). These myths persist as barriers in understanding the real gender issues in the writing classroom: gender issues that prevent our understanding of students, texts, pedagogy, the writing process, and

even of ourselves. But as researchers such as Gilligan, Belenky, Clinchy, and Goldberger have found, the liberating effects of recognizing the distinctiveness of women's voices is best achieved by encouraging journal and autobiographical forms of writing in the classroom, through which both women and men discover the distinctiveness of their own voices and are thus encouraged to develop alternatives to male-dominated ways of knowing and their pedagogies.

Significant research shows us that as instructors, we need to recognize that male and female students' approaches to various problems in the writing process, especially writing blocks, are often perceived and solved differently. In recent research on women writers, Mary Kupiec Cayton reports that women students, more than their male counterparts, tend to look more closely at subjective issues, to have a relationship with the subject of the text, and to want to know more about the dynamics of relationships explored through writing ("What Happens When Things Go Wrong"). And David Bleich has found that in terms of reading fiction, "women enter the world of the novel, take it as something 'there' for that purpose; men [instead] see the novel as a result of someone's action and construe its meaning or logic in those terms" (239). But in a broader sense, the exciting conclusions from this research may suggest ways of revising the writing curriculum and our own ways of thinking about students as readers and writers.

By allowing students to discover their voices, both through collaboration and through exploratory writing, instructors also encourage them to demystify stereotypes. Rethinking roles in the classroom can empower, especially in the case

of women students, who, as Cora Agatucci argues, are very often treated by instructors, even unconsciously, as dependent, rather than as capable problem solvers, a characteristic that Agatucci suggests instructors ascribe to their male students.

My own research in several sections of composition and public speaking courses reveals that some of these traditional stereotypes persist among students, even in 1993. Based on a research study by Beverly Shann in 1979, in which she used a set of gender-biased statements from Matthew's Scale of Attitudes Toward Women's Roles in Society, I presented a similar set of statements to students, asking them to rate on a continuum a number of stereotypical statements about women and men, indicating whether they strongly agreed with, felt neutral about, or strongly disagreed with each statement. Here are a few samples: "Women should accept their role in life as wives and mothers, not as career women" and "A woman with a successful career ought to delay marriage." Shann's findings in 1979 from a group of over 500 college students, indicated that, in Shann's words: "Men were consistently closer to the traditional, stereotypical position on these scales than women, with one exception--women expressed greater liking for children and the traditionally feminine child care role." While many of the stereotypical beliefs expressed in statements on this scale seem outdated or even incredibly oppressive to us nearly 15 years later, findings from the three classes I surveyed suggest that these stereotypes still have credence with a small number of students, and particularly with male students. Nearly 50% of the male respondents

tended to feel, for instance, that at least to some degree: "A woman's true happiness lies in her home and family."

Other recent research by David J. Bergen and John E. Williams finds no significant change in sex-role stereotypes between 1972 and 1988. Even more recently, researchers Peggy L. McLean and Debra L. Gabrilowitz at my own university conclude that gender-linked attitudes have undergone some modifications during the last decade--in the workplace, tv, managers, and law enforcement, but that sex role stereotypes concerning these roles still persist.

What we face, then, are often subtle but persistent attitudes that women's roles are limited. The assignments and strategies we use can serve to change such attitudes despite Paglia's and other theorists' assertions that the biological constraints of gender prevent planned social change. I have used some of the following strategies in an effort to permit students different ways of thinking about the gender-biases they may hold:

Generally, we need to increase the range of readings by women in the composition classroom. According to Teresa Kynell ("Wives, Mothers, and Scholars"), composition reading textbooks are often limited to essays about women in literature or about gender issues. We need to select texts that incorporate more readings by women written on a wider range of topics than on gender and women's issues alone. We can also make use of essays with unusual

gender twists, such as Richard Rodriguez's essay, "The Boy's Desire," which talks about why a boy wanted to have a doll.[1]

We can challenge students' thinking about gender issues with some of the following assignments: Have students write an assignment in two forms: first taking any perspective they'd like, using their own voice, their own ideas. Then, ask them to revise the essay, writing it from what they consider to be a female perspective if male and from a male perspective if female. Another possible writing assignment asks students to work in male-female teams, writing a dialogue between a man and a woman. The students create character roles and the setting and then write the dialogue together with the men writing the women's parts and the women writing the men's. Then when they've finished, I ask them to consider these questions: What assumptions have you made? What stereotypes do you have about men's and women's roles? After students have completed a longer writing assignment, such as an essay, I ask them to substitute he for she, her for him, and other gender-specific pronouns for the opposite cases. After completing this task, I have them ask which are not logical? Which are ok? And, how has the meaning of the essay changed as a result of switching gender roles?

Finally, as an aid to our understanding of how well students have grasped gender issues in both reading and writing assignments, I often use a 1-min. paper at the end of a class session, a strategy used by Toby Fulwiler and others. I ask

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[1] in Stephen Reid, The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers, second edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992, 90-91. First published in California Magazine, 1983.

the students to write briefly and anonymously on the following two questions: 1. What, in your view, was the main point of today's discussion? 2. After the discussion, what are you still wondering about? This short assignment allows students to ask questions candidly, ones they were afraid to ask in class, and it can give us a sense of what worked and what didn't, especially regarding gender issues we've discussed in class.

CONCLUSION

Breaking down gender barriers suggests that we rethink the forms of writing we demand of our students (e.g., argumentation and exposition) and that we encourage a wider range of approaches as legitimate. We need to spread the word to colleagues in other departments that various writing assignments such as autobiography or business narratives can help students understand various ways of knowing outside the often patriarchal hierarchy of corporations. Women's ways of knowing have thus not only helped us to expand the canon, but to expand our thinking about pedagogy, writing assignments, and about the roles of students and instructors themselves inside and outside the writing classroom.

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